EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE, AND LIMITING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Must one be a mystic in order to have a "religious experience?" No, the notion of religious experience is a very generous notion. Perhaps one must be a mystic in order to have a "direct" encounter with a religiously ultimate object, but there are many types of experience which give rise to religious world-views indirectly through reflection upon what these experiences seem ultimately to imply. A typical discussion of the cosmological argument shows that many religious thinkers hold that any experienced object, typically those contingent objects given in sense experience, ultimately implies the existence of God. There is another realm of experience, the realm of the "inner life", which for many thinkers provides an experiential beginning point for the development of religious world-views. This route to God through self-awareness has been emphasized heavily by men of deep religious devotion throughout the ages and in all cultures. In the last two centuries or so, it has been the special province of a group of thinkers who are somewhat loosely grouped together under the label of "existentialists." We shall call this realm of self-awareness "existential experience," and we shall attempt to understand how reflection upon this realm of experience frequently gives rise to religious world-views, how it raises questions which only religious beliefs can satisfactorily answer, and how these questions themselves are rather peculiar questions.

First, what sorts of experiences do we have in mind when we speak of "existential experience?" If we generalize before we itemize, we might say that they are experiences which make us deeply aware of our own limits and which generate questions about the nature of our ultimate limiter. Existentialists have had a great deal to say about such inner experiences as the experiences of alienation, anxiety, anguish, fear, frustration, meaninglessness, guilt, a sense of sin and of the unconditional significance of morality. To be sure, the word "experience" here may be only a synonym for "feeling,"

and we may legitimately wonder how feelings could have any noetic significance at all. The existentialist will always insist that it is not simply a matter of feeling, that there is something more, something special, something of noetic significance, about such feelings. It is difficult to determine just what is being suggested here, but we may venture the guess that there are always elements of reflection as well as elements of feeling in "experiences" of guilt, anxiety, meaninglessness, etc. Among sentient beings, it seems that only men have these feelings, and that they arise only after a man has to some degree reflected upon own personal predicament, his own limits and shortcomings, and the fragileness and fragmentariness of his powers, perspectives, and achievements. Insecurity about the uncertain future, and knowledge that death is an inevitability may generate feelings of deep disquietude. Life is but a vapor; man is but a thinking reed.

In moments of deep disquietude, men begin to ask peculiar questions, questions which somehow cannot be answered in the usual way, questions which are verbal counterparts of the deep inner awareness of finitude. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why does anything exist at all? Does human life have ultimate or cosmic significance at all? Why was I ever born? Why should I do what is right? Why do the innocent suffer? What is the plan of history? What is the purpose of nature? What is the ultimate destiny of man? Why should I be moral? Why should I be reasonable? Can my burden of guilt be lifted? Why did they have to die so young?

In *The Place of Reason in Ethics*, Stephen Toulmin called special attention to questions such as these, and he gave them the label "limiting questions". These are questions which ask for explanations which fall outside the realm of normal everyday scientific and moral explanation, but which nevertheless in some ways resemble our questions about scientific matters of fact and everyday moral practices. When he begins to discuss such questions, Toulmin says that they are:

> questions expressed in a form borrowed from a familiar mode of reasoning, but not doing the job which they normally do within that mode of reasoning. It is characteristic of them that only a small change is required, either in the form of the question, or in the context in which it is asked, in order to

> bring it unquestionably back into the scope of its apparent reasoning. But it is equally characteristic of them that the way of answering suggested by the form of words so employed will never completely satisfy the questioner, so that he continues to ask the question even after the resources of the apparent mode of reasoning have been exhausted. Questions of this kind I shall refer to as "limiting questions": they are of particular interest when one is examining the limits and boundaries of any mode of reasoning – and of ethical reasoning in particular.[1]

Although he warns us that "not all 'limiting questions' are 'religious', and not all 'religious' questions are 'limiting'," [2] it is nevertheless clear that Toulmin thinks that *some* limiting questions are also religious questions. What more can Toulmin tell us about those questions which are both limiting and religious? He suggests that no matter how they are answered, people never seem to be satisfied with the answers, but that nevertheless there is an urge "to give it the kind of answer which its form appears to demand," [3] e.g. to try to give a "scientific" answer to a question which is really not a scientific question at all, or to try to give a moral answer to a metamoral question. Toulmin further tells us that limiting questions are at least of deep psychological importance, and that there is really no point to insisting that they are totally nonsensical or that we ought to stop asking them altogether:

> The feeling of urgency behind so many of them, the insistence with which they recur, itself suggests that no good is done by bottling them up; and, provided that one recognizes them for what they are, what can there be against our asking them? Indeed, such questions have a positive value, as both psychology and history show. Psychologically, they help us to *accept* the world, just as the explanations of science help us to understand it . . .[4]

[1] Stephen E. Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (Cambridge, The University Press, 1960), p. 205.
[2] *Ibid*, p. 213.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 206.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 209.

> The importance of such questions can also be seen from history. Had we never asked questions extra-rationally, we should never have come to ask them rationally. All our typically rational methods of argument have developed out of less typically rational prototypes – science, for instance, grew out of magic and primitive religion – and it is illuminating to contrast the undeveloped prototype with its descendant, the developed mode of reasoning.[5]

Limiting questions are expressions of the deep human need for reassurance,[6] but are they merely of psychological significance? Have they no significance for reason, for truth, for knowledge? The answer which we get from Toulmin himself is not very explicit. On the one hand he tries to contrast religious questions with scientific and ethical questions by making use of the old dichotomy between faith and reason and a sort of Hegelian contrast of figurative and literal language. On the other hand, he obviously does want to say that reason does have a place in religion. He tells us that: "All this is not to say that there is no 'reasoning' to be done in theology and religion – it would be highly paradoxical to declare that the writings of Augustine and Aquinas (for example) were not 'reasoned'. It is only to mark the differences between the kinds of 'reasoning' one can sensibly call for, in science and ethics, on the one hand, and in religion, on the other."[7] Nevertheless, it is never made quite clear whether the use of reason in religion is anything more than a rationalization of our reassurances. Is there a sense in which religious affirmations and the premisses and conclusions of theological arguments are *true* as well as reassuring? Do the *answers* to our limiting questions count as knowledge as well as give comfort? Do they really "tell it like it is?" Toulmin certainly holds that there are "evidences" for the truth of religious beliefs, though not "strict proofs" in some scientific or mathematical sense of "demonstration".[8] In line with his own assumption that different modes of reasoning are appropriate to different forms of life and that each may have its own unique "logic", Toulmin might have developed more explicitly the

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 210–211.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 211.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 216.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 217.

view that although religious and metaphysical beliefs are not quite the same as scientific beliefs, there is such a thing as religious and metaphysical reasoning and knowledge. Religious believers certainly think that there are correct and incorrect systems of religious doctrine and that the line of demarcation between the two is not quite the same as the line of demarcation which separates the reassuring from the disconcerting. Although he does acknowledge that limiting questions are asked in those moments when we feel disconcertingly insecure, Toulmin nevertheless paid only minimal attention to the overall context of "existential experiences" out of which such questions arise, particularly to the acute awareness of the truth of the proposition "I am a finite being" which typically accompanies the asking of limiting questions.

Other recent thinkers who have reflected upon such matters have gone beyond Toulmin in their estimate of the religious significance of limiting questions, and in their insistence upon the cognitive as well as the psychological significance of the answers which may be given to these questions. For example, in his *Mind* article titled "A Neglected Use of Theological Language", Robert C. Coburn adroitly pushes the matter of psychological and linguistic function far beyond where Toulmin had left it. Coburn agrees with Toulmin that limiting questions arise characteristically out of some kind of "existential experience", though he expands the list of such experiences beyond a simple need for reassurance, and he offers the debatable claim that there is a criteriological connection between such verbal behavior and the inner existential states of soul. He tells us that:

> By a limiting question I shall mean a form of words which has the grammatical structure of a question, but which is such that a typical utterance of the form of words does not amount to asking a straightforward question of either a theoretical or a practical sort. Rather, such an utterance characteristically constitutes a piece of linguistic behavior which satisfies part of a criterion of some "inner" passion or action, or, as we might put it more loosely, which is an "essential" feature of some "state or activity of the soul".[9]

[9] Robert C. Coburn, "A Neglected Use of Theological Language," *Mind*, Vol. LXXII, July 1963, p. 371.

> . . . the occasions upon which these questions are raised are occasions in which the questioner is in a spiritual condition of some kind, a condition such as grief or despair or what William James somewhere calls *zerissenheit*, or is engaging in a "spiritual" activity of some kind, an activity such as marvelling or worshipping or blaspheming.[10]

Coburn pays more attention to the problem of the status of *the answers* to limiting questions than does Toulmin. He acknowledges that such answers may have a number of diverse functions, but he concentrates on one such function which they typically have which he thinks to be specially significant. It is the function of "providing logically complete answers to religious limiting questions."[11] Coburn defines the notion of a "logically complete answer" as "an answer the acceptance of which by the person raising the question is logically incompatible with his continuing to ask the question; that is to say, incompatible in the sense that his continuing to ask the question in some form or other would normally be taken as showing either that he had not understood the answer which had previously been provided, or that he had not accepted it."[12]

Coburn is here maintaining that the asking of limiting questions is of psychological significance in another way besides that of indicating that the questioner is deeply disquieted. Assuming that an answer to such a question has been given and understood, a continued persistence in asking limiting questions is a clear indication that the questioner has not accepted the answer, that he is not deeply committed to the system of theological belief within the framework of which the "logically complete answers" are provided. If a questioner *persists* in asking why innocent children have to suffer, and if he understands the claims that "it is the will of God", this is a rather clear indication that he simply does not believe that it is the will of God after all! Limiting questions are asked by men of little faith, men who simply do not know or else do not believe the ultimate answers.

Even when they ostensibly claim to believe, their claims are suspect. In the case of such men, "the genuineness of their limiting

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 373.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 376.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 375.

questions would count against the genuineness of their faith and/or the depth of their understanding of theological concepts."[13] "It is clear, I believe, that satisfaction of some of the conditions which we should want to include in any analysis of religiosity – such as *e.g.* the disposition to act and feel agapistically, and to show courage and hope in times of distress – tends to be incompatible with being in those 'spiritual' states which normally erupt in the asking of (at least certain) religious limiting questions."[14] There are "intimate connections between religiosity and the absence of dispositions to ask religious limiting questions. Hence, the tendency for religiosity and belief to be associated in the way the Western theological tradition indicates."[15]

> By virtue of this semantic feature of theological language, it may be said, whenever a person asks a religious limiting question he *eo ipso* rejects theological doctrine – either in part or, what is more likely because of the integrity of theological language as a whole, *in toto*. Moreover, the conditions of which the asking of religious limiting questions are more or less essential ingredients are conditions which are virtually unavoidable for normal human beings. Tragedy in some form is always with us; so also are *zerrissenheit* and moral perplexity – at least in some degree. But this is just to say that unfaith, understood as involving the rejection of theological affirmations, is virtually unavoidable – indeed almost inevitably a recurrent feature of the spiritual pilgrimmage of the "believer."[16]

Existential experience thus may provide an experiential beginning point for the development of a system of religious belief; it may be a stimulus to reflection upon one's own existential predicament; but it does not of itself provide such an interpretive scheme; and it persists so long as the scheme is regarded as inadequate. Presumably, however, an adequate world-view could allay such anxieties, though Coburn does not say as much; and the prevalence of so much existential anxiety in our modern world is an indication of the break-

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 378.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 380.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 381.

down of traditional religious ideologies and a serious groping for new and more adequate "logically complete answers". Despite all of this, we still do not get a great deal of help from Coburn's discussion of logically complete answers to religiously limiting questions in our attempt to understand whether and how religion may be true as well as comforting. Without belittling the significance of psychology, we may still insist upon the importance of the question of the *truth* of theological and metaphysical beliefs. As C. D. Broad once wrote "You would not get much comfort from postulating the existence of God so long as you remembered that you were postulating it only to give yourself comfort."[17]

In his essay titled "On the Meaning of 'God': Transcendence Without Mythology," Gordon Kaufman has developed one of the most promising recent attempts to deal with the noetic significance of existential experience, limiting questions, and the answers to them provided by religion. As the title of the essay suggests, Kaufman wrestles with the problem of whether the concept of 'God" can be made meaningful in an era which has abandoned the "other-world" mythology of supernaturalism. He says that "The purpose of the present paper is to show that the meaning of the word 'God', even in its reference to the 'transcendent', can be developed and understood entirely in terms of this-worldly (i.e., 'secular)' experiences and conceptions – that is, in terms fully comprehensible and significant to the most 'modern' of men – and that therefore the whole issue of a presupposed cosmological dualism, so problematic for modern man, can be bypassed."[18] Kaufman wants to begin with experiences which are universally human, not with those which only mystics can enjoy. He finds a realm of human discourse which is culturally universal and thoroughly secular in our talk about what we have been calling "existential experience", and he finds that much of our God-talk is generated "within the context of man's sense of limitation, finitude, guilt and sin, on the one hand, and his question about the meaning or value or significance of himself, his life, and his world, on the other."[19] We must begin with:

[17] C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1956), p. 255.
[18] Gordon D. Kaufman, "On the Meaning of 'God': Transcendence without Mythology," (*Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 59, April, 1966), p. 108, Footnote 6.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

> particular events of suffering, death (of others), joy, peace, etc. It is only in *reflection upon these* and the attempt to *understand ourselves in the light of these happenings* that we become aware of our limitedness on all sides. Along with this awareness of our being hemmed in, powerful emotions of terror, despair, revulsion, anxiety, and the like, are often – perhaps always – generated, and this total intellectual-emotional complex may then be called the "experience of finitude" or awareness of the "boundary situation", or something of the sort. But it must be observed that this "experience" of radical contingency is not an *immediate* awareness of restriction, as when one butts one's head directly against a stone wall; it depends rather upon a generalization from such occasional immediate experiences of limitation to the total situation of the self. The self, in this way perceived as hemmed in on all sides, comes to a new and deeper awareness of its nature and powers: it is *finite*, master neither of itself nor of its world. Thus, the so-called experience of finitude or contingency, however powerful the emotions which accompany and deepen and reinforce it, has an intellectual root, and it is possible only because man is a reflective being."[20]

The self-awareness with which we begin existentially is not directly a form of God-awareness, but the concept of God arises out of our reflection upon the diverse forms of human finitude which our diverse and intense existential feelings will not allow us to ignore. There is an important bit of self-knowledge which such existential experiences constantly press upon us, the knowledge that "I am finite". This is not something that any individual human being is ever likely to outgrow. For us there is no such thing as reaching a state of maturity in which this self-knowledge is superseded, despite Bonhoeffer's ambiguous suggestions to the contrary. In such a state we would have to be God in all his glory! The awareness of ourselves as limited beings is of religious significance, however, for it generates a questioning process. We begin to wonder about the *limiter* and in our religious moments about the *ultimate limiter* which stands over against us. Kaufman points out that the name "God" functions religiously as the name of our ultimate limiter. Such an idea "refers

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 115–116.

to that which we do *not* know but which is the ultimate limit of all our experiences."[21] There is a dualism of sorts implicit in all of this, but it is not the traditional religious dualism of "this world", and the "other world." Rather it is "the duality of experience and its limit(s)."[22]

Kaufman does not directly discuss the "limiting questions" to which Toulmin and Coburn address themselves, but he does give us a clue as to the proper understanding of the noetic significance of such questions. Such questions are not questions about other finite limiters, and thus they cannot be answered "scientifically". Rather they are questions about our Ultimate Limiter, and the answers to them must be supplied by metaphysical construction. The *answers* to these questions must do more than provide us with a sense of cosmic reassurance. While they may do just that, they must also tell us the truth about our ultimate limiter. Kaufman points out correctly that there are various models which may be taken for understanding our Ultimate Limiter, models which are drawn from our experience of more limited limiters.

> The self's awareness of being restricted on all sides, rendering problematic the very meaning of its existence, gives rise to the question: *What* is it that in this way hems us in? How is the *ultimate* Limit, of which we are aware in the "experience of our finitude," to be conceived? There appear to be four fundamental types of limiting experience, and these supply models with the aid of which the ultimate Limit can be conceived. The first two are relatively simple: a) selves experience external *physical* limitation and restriction upon their activities through the resistance of material objects over against them; b) they experience from within the *organic* limitation of their own powers, especially in illness, weakness, failure, exhaustion, etc. The other two are somewhat more complex: c) they experience the external *personal* limitation of other selves engaging in activities and programs running counter to their own – i.e., the clash of wills, decisions, and purposes – but precisely because matters of volition and intention are subjective, this is neither simply internal nor

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 115.

> external but is interpersonal and social; d) they experience the *normative* constraints and restrictions upon them expressed in such distinctions as true-fale, sreal-illusory, good-bad, right-wrong, beautiful-ugly, et., which distinctions, though felt subjectively from within, appear to the self not to be its own spontaneous creations but to impinge upon it with categorical demands and claims.[23]

After exploring these models, Kaufman then shows us how various generalized world view emphasize one or the other of these models. Naturalistic and materialistic world views conceive of the ultimate limit (Nature as a Whole) after the model of a physical limiter. Vitalistic philosophies such as those developed by Bergson and Whitehead emphasize the model of organic limitation. Certain "Idealistic" philosophies emphasizes normative limitation. And theistic religion, especially Biblical religion, emphasizes personal limitation.[24] We shall return to his illuminating discussion of personal limitation and the "transcendence" of even the human Thou shortly, but for now let us ask a question which might have been explored profitably by Kaufman. Is it possible to combine these models? Are they mutually exclusive?

It is rather clear that theistic religion combines the personalistic model with the normative model, for God is both the Ultimate Thou and the Ultimate Good in traditional theism. But traditional theism has shied away from the organic and the physical models in its emphasis upon the doctrine that "God is a spirit." In doing so, however, it has created grave problems for itself, for spirit must manifest itself to us somehow, and the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation may be seen as an attempt to compensate for this excessive emphasis on pure spirituality. Assuming that other human minds are really there, we still would not be able to know very much about them if they did not reveal themselves to us through their bodily structure and behavior, and in understanding their bodily structure and behavior we find both mechanistic and organismic models to be illuminating. Why should we not be able to combine our models in our attempt to explicate the nature of our Ultimate Limits in such a manner as this? If we were to do so,

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 118–119.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 122.

something like the panentheistic world view developed by Charles Hartshorne would be the result. It would really be an oversimplification to say that the Whiteheadians emphasize *only* an organismic model for understanding our Ultimate Limits. The truth of the matter is that the Whiteheadian view of the relation of God and the World emphasizes *all* of these models at once. The physical model is emphasized, for the World is the body of God through which he constantly presents himself to us. Unlike the naturalists who see Nature as a Whole as *merely* physical, the panentheists also emphasize the organic model. As the body of God, the world is a unified teleological whole comprised of unified teleological parts, and is related to them in something like the way in which the human body as a whole is related to its constituent cells. The personal model is also emphasized; for God is the Thou of the world, sensitive to and respecting the individuality and integrity of all the lesser Thou's in the created order of things. He is the great companion, the fellow sufferer who understands. The normative model is also emphasized, for God is axiologically perfect, the one who in total freedom, impartiality, enlightenment, and sympathy harmonizes the disharmonies of the world and receives into himself and preserves and enjoys forever the achieved value of the world.

There are things about the use of this personal model which need to be emphasized and further developed by the process theologians, however. There is indeed a type of transcendence implied by the use of the personalistic model. As Gordon Kaufman has indicated, it is not the traditional mythological spatio-temporal transcendence of the "other world" which the supernaturalistic metaphysical map has enshrined into orthodoxy. The lines separating us from God must be drawn differently. They must be drawn in such a way that even a secular man can understand them. The otherness of God must be understood in part by analogy with the otherness of human minds, where the invisible lies behind the visible and manifests or reveals itself through the visible. We must emphasize one point, however, on which Kaufman is a bit hazy, i.e. that if persons do reveal their presence and their purposes to us through their behavior, including their verbal behavior, the physical and organic models are also indispensable. So it may be in the case of God as well. With this in mind, let us now look at some of Kaufman's astute observations on transcendence and personal models.

In a manner not characteristic of the other finite limiters, however, the personalistic image lends itself to a reopening of the question not only of the Limit, but of what is beyond it. For (as we noted above) it interprets man's relationship to that which ultimately limits him as being like his relationship to the finite selves with which he is in interaction. Such selves over against me always transcend in their subjectivity and freedom what is directly accessible to me in my experience (i.e., their bodies) even though they "come to me" and communicate with me in and through this physical dimension of their being that is open to my view. What I directly experience of the other, strictly speaking, are the external physical sights and sounds which he makes, not the deciding, acting, purposing center of the self – though I have no doubt these externalities are not *merely* physical phenomena but are the outward and visible expressions of inner thought, purpose, intention. Thus I do not speak merely of "sights and sounds" but of the "sights and sounds which *he* makes" in *his* attempt to act or to communicate. In my interaction with other persons I presuppose a reality (the active center of the self) *beyond* that which I immediately perceive, a reality encountered by me and known to me not simply in physiologically-based perception (though that is of course also involved) but in and through the language which we jointly speak. It is in the act of communication that we discover that the other is more than merely physical being, is a conscious self; it is in the experience of speaking and hearing that we come to know the *personal* hidden behind and in the merely physical. This is the most powerful experience we have of the *transcendence of the given* on the finite level, the awareness of genuine activity and reality *beyond* and *behind* what is directly open to our view.

When this type of complex interrelationship is used to interpret the ultimate Limit, it is clear that an active reality (or "self") beyond the Limit – beyond what is directly experienceable as such – will be implied. A self in its active center is never directly open to view, but is known only as he reveals himself in communication and communion. Likewise, on this model God cannot be identified with what is accessible

> to or within our experience, not even with the ultimate Limit of our experience; rather this Limit must be grasped as the *medium* through which God encounters us (as noises and gestures are media for finite selves), God himself being conceived as the dynamic acting reality beyond the Limit. In this way a certain reference to reality beyond the Limit of our experience is intrinsic to the personalistic image, and therefore such reference need not depend upon nor involve a reversion to mythology. It must be emphasized, however, that references of this sort to transcendent reality are justifiable only when the ultimate Limit is understood in terms of a personal limiter; for only in the interaction with other selves do we encounter an active reality which comes to us from beyond what is accessible in experience. Organic, physical and normative limiters can all be interpreted exhaustively in terms of what is given in and to experience (though it is not essential to do so), and it is mythology; therefore, if one speaks of a transcendent extra-experiential reality on the basis of one of those models; a personal limiter alone necessarily and intrinsically involves genuine transcendence.
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> Correlative with this reference to a locus of reality beyond the Limit there must be a conception of revelation.[25]

Limiting questions and the answers which are given to them are not peculiar and non-scientific simply because they are merely of psychological significance. Rather, they are peculiar and non-scientific because they are metaphysical, because they pertain to ultimate limiters, because they indicate both a search for and a discovery of the depths of reality, depths which go beyond the "seen" and explain the seen in terms of the "unseen." It is not simply religion which does this, however. Even the secular man can be brought to the realization that the same sort of thing that goes on in religion also goes on in our everyday intercourse with persons, except where our epistemological and metaphysical preconceptions force us to treat persons as things. There are interesting historical parallels between the way philosophers treat the concept of God and the way

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 125–127.

in which they treat the concept of other minds. Behaviorists view nature as a whole as a non-personal "It" because they view people that way. Solipsists view nature as a whole as a mere appearance because they view people that way. Religious believers view nature as a whole as having an inner spiritual depth all its own because they view people that way. Of course, just as there is no inevitable route from sense experience to belief in other minds, so there is no inevitable route from existential experience and the asking of limiting questions to belief in God as the ultimate limiter, and Kaufman does not claim that there is. Alternative models are available, and the naturalist chooses one whereas the theist chooses another. But there is a common point of origin, a knowledge of one's own finitude, and there is room for discussion *and argument* about the appropriateness of the various models.

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